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A Sketch of the Aristotelian Tradition in Cusanus' Time

This introductory chapter will present a brief overview of the transmission of Aristotle's works, with a special focus on Nicolaus Cusanus and his time. A few remarks about the transmission of Aristotle's works in antiquity and the Middle Ages are followed by a fuller discussion of the Latin translations available by the 15th century, and especially to Cusanus.

1 The transmission of Aristotle's works in Greek

Aristotle (384 – 322 *BC*) taught at his own school, the Lyceum (Λύκειον) in Athens, which had originally been a temple dedicated to Apollo Lyceus. However, the school was usually referred to as the Peripatus, as it was equipped with a covered walking place (περίπατος); its members were consequently known as Peripatetics. Aristotle taught there from 335 to 322 *BC*, when he was forced to flee to Euboia for political reasons. Of his numerous works on topics of philosophy and science, some were meant for a wider audience (exoteric works), whereas some others were revised lecture notes from his school (esoteric works) that already circulated during his lifetime. Following his death, the school continued to flourish, but already after his successor, Theophrastus of Eresus, the library containing the latter's and Aristotle's works was relocated by Neleus of Scepsis, who had been appointed by Theophrastus as his successor, but was not elected as the head of the school. From this point onwards, the school's books seem to have been no longer easily accessible, although some of Aristotle's works may have been available at the library of Alexandria (founded shortly after the city in 331 *BC*).[1] By accident, a large part of the esoteric works reached the Roman era and finally us. However, only a handful of fragments from the exoteric ones still survives: only the former are responsible for the widely known large impact of Aristotelian thought in subsequent history. Much has been written about the precise details of the collection's early transmission, but all our information about the events boils down to two near-contemporary accounts in ancient literature. The first is provided by the geographer Strabo (c. 63 *BC* – c. 24 *AD*) who mentions the books when dealing with the town of Scepsis in his *Geographica* (XIII, 1, 54):[2]

1 For an overview, see Flashar 2013, 63 – 67. For Aristotle's biography, Flashar 2013, 9 – 62. As a general synopsis of Aristotle and his thought, Düring 1966 is still unsurpassed. I thank Ruedi Imbach for reading a version of this text.

2 Edited by Radt 2002 – 2011, vol. 34, 602.

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Ἐκ δὲ τῆς Σκήψεως οἵ τε Σωκρατικοὶ γεγόνασιν Ἔραστος καὶ Κορίσκος καὶ ὁ τοῦ Κορίσκου υἱὸς Νηλεύς, ἀνὴρ καὶ Ἀριστοτέλους ἠκροαμένος καὶ Θεοφράστου, διαδεδεγμένος δὲ τὴν βιβλιοθήκην τοῦ Θεοφράστου, ἐν ᾗ ἦν καὶ ἡ τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους. ὁ γοῦν Ἀριστοτέλης τὴν ἑαυτοῦ Θεοφράστῳ παρέδωκεν, ᾧπερ καὶ τὴν σχολὴν ἀπέλιπε, πρῶτος ὧν ἴσμεν συναγαγὼν βιβλία καὶ διδάξας τοὺς ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ βασιλέας βιβλιοθήκης σύνταξιν. Θεόφραστος δὲ Νηλεῖ παρέδωκεν, ὁ δ' εἰς Σκῆψιν κομίσας τοῖς μετ' αὐτὸν παρέδωκεν, ἰδιώταις ἀνθρώποις, οἳ κατάκλειστα εἶχον τὰ βιβλία οὐδ' ἐπιμελῶς κείμενα. ἐπειδὴ δ' ᾔσθοντο τὴν σπουδὴν τῶν Ἀτταλικῶν βασιλέων, ὑφ' οἷς ἦν ἡ πόλις, ζητούντων βιβλία εἰς τὴν κατασκευὴν τῆς ἐν Περγάμῳ βιβλιοθήκης, κατὰ γῆς ἔκρυψαν ἐν διώρυγί τινι. ὑπὸ δὲ νοτίας καὶ σητῶν κακωθέντα ὀψέ ποτε ἀπέδοντο οἱ ἀπὸ τοῦ γένους Ἀπελλικῶντι τῷ Τηΐῳ πολλῶν ἀργυρίων τά τε Ἀριστοτέλους καὶ τὰ τοῦ Θεοφράστου βιβλία.

The Socratic philosophers Erastus and Coriscus were from Scepsis, and Neleus the son of Coriscus, a man who studied under Aristotle and Theophrastus, inherited Theophrastus' library which included that of Aristotle. Aristotle, indeed, imparted his own to Theophrastus to whom he also bequeathed the school. He was the first man of whom we know to have collected books and it was he who taught the Egyptian kings the organisation of a library. Theophrastus imparted the books to Neleus who brought them to Scepsis and imparted them to his own heirs, who were laymen and kept them carelessly locked up. But when they heard of the zeal of the Attalic kings, to whom the city was subject, looking for books for the establishment of the library of Pergamon, they hid them in a subterranean trench. Spoiled by moisture and moths, members of his family at length sold the books of Aristotle and Theophrastus to Apellicon of Teus for a lot of money.

A few generations later, the Platonic philosopher Plutarch (c. 46–120) tells us more about the fate of Apellicon's library in *Life of Sulla* 26:[3]

ἀναχθεὶς δὲ πάσαις ταῖς ναυσὶν ἐξ Ἐφέσου, τριταῖος ἐν Πειραιεῖ καθωρμίσθη, καὶ μυηθεὶς ἐξεῖλεν ἑαυτῷ τὴν Ἀπελλικῶνος τοῦ Τηΐου βιβλιοθήκην, ἐν ᾗ τὰ πλεῖστα τῶν Ἀριστοτέλους καὶ Θεοφράστου βιβλίων ἦν, οὔπω τότε σαφῶς γνωριζόμενα τοῖς πολλοῖς. λέγεται δὲ κομισθείσης αὐτῆς εἰς Ῥώμην, Τυραννίωνα τὸν γραμματικὸν ἐνσκευάσασθαι τὰ πολλά, καὶ παρ' αὐτοῦ τὸν Ῥόδιον Ἀνδρόνικον εὐπορήσαντα τῶν ἀντιγράφων εἰς μέσον θεῖναι καὶ ἀναγράψαι τοὺς νῦν φερομένους πίνακας. οἱ δὲ πρεσβύτεροι Περιπατητικοὶ φαίνονται μὲν καθ' ἑαυτοὺς γενόμενοι χαρίεντες καὶ φιλολόγοι, τῶν δὲ Ἀριστοτέλους καὶ Θεοφράστου συγγραμμάτων οὔτε πολλοῖς οὔτ' ἀκριβῶς ἐντετυχηκότες διὰ ‹τὸ› τὸν Νηλέως τοῦ Σκηψίου κλῆρον, ᾧ τὰ βιβλία κατέλιπε Θεόφραστος, εἰς ἀφιλοτίμους καὶ ἰδιώτας ἀνθρώπους περιγενέσθαι.

Having set sail with all his ships in Ephesus, [Sulla] moored in Piraeus on the third day; after being initiated [at Eleusis] he took hold of the library of Apellicon of Teus, among which were most of the books of Aristotle and Theophrastus, back then not yet widely known. It is said that, once in Rome, the grammarian Tyrannion prepared most of them and Andronicus of Rhodes, who had procured copies from him, published them and compiled the tables now in use. The older Peripatetics had apparently become clever and erudite by themselves having neither much nor precise acquaintance of the writings of Aristotle and Theophrastus because the inheritance of Neleus of Scepsis, to whom Theophrastus left the books, ended up with indifferent laymen.

3 Edited by Angeli Bertinelli, Manfredini, Piccirilli, and Pisani 1997, 166–168.

The original collection of works by Aristotle and Theophrastus seems thus to have come into the possession of the bibliophile Apellicon of Teos, who kept them in Athens. Sulla, when capturing Athens, took them to Rome, where they were reworked, edited and published by the Peripatetic Andronicus of Rhodes; before these events, the books had been hidden away. It is hard to say how much of this story is actually accurate, especially since our knowledge of Hellenistic philosophy and therefore of the then current knowledge of Aristotle is so scanty.[4] In any case, after these events Peripatetics are found again in the Roman empire and a number of Greek commentaries on Aristotelian works are extant; the most famous of these men was Alexander of Aphrodisias, who flourished around 200 *AD*.[5] From the 3rd century onwards, the Aristotelian schools were increasingly influenced by Neoplatonism, and vice versa. Consequently, Neoplatonism became saturated with Aristotelian terminology and to a lesser degree methodology, as can be well observed in the writings of Plotinus or Proclus. As Dodds points out:[6]

> The influence of Aristotle, especially in the domain of logic, increased steadily from the time of Plotinus down to that of the last Alexandrian philosophers, who are almost as much Aristotelians as Neoplatonists.

Christianity was also strongly influenced by this unification of philosophical schools and acquired a strong Neoplatonist background, thus including a good dose of Aristotelianism. Therefore, Christians like John Philoponus (c. 490 – c. 570) were able to become important Aristotle commentators. However, in antiquity the entire development of Aristotelianism happened in Greek, the standard language of philosophy and science.

2 *Aristoteles Latinus*

As far as we know, the first attempts to translate Aristotelian works into Latin were only made in late antiquity, when the knowledge of Greek among educated Romans in the Western part of the empire could no longer be taken for granted. Most notably, Boethius translated much of Aristotle's logical writings (the *Organon*) into Latin.[7] These translations were influential as mediaeval school books, but new Aristotle translations began to be made only in the 12th century:[8] most of the extant works were first translated into Latin around 1150 *AD*. Missing works and new ones, as

4 On the destiny of these books before Andronicus, see Moraux 1973 – 2001, vol. 1, 3 – 94.
5 On the Aristotelian school in antiquity, see Lynch 1972.
6 Dodds 1964, xxiii, n. 5.
7 Except probably the *Analytica posteriora*. At least, we find that none of the extant Latin versions dates back to Boethius. See the editions by Minio-Paluello in AL (Steel *et al*. 1939-, vol. 4).
8 Cf. Brams 2003.

well as better translations were added in a second wave about a century later, most notably by William of Moerbeke (c. 1215 – 1286). A third wave of translations occurred between 1400 and 1600 and was initiated by a humanist desire to have translations written in better Latin style. We shall now take a closer look at these three waves of translations.[9]

The 12th century brought changes to many facets of life in Latin Europe. Back in 1933, Haskins[10] hailed this century as a "renaissance," hinting at the fact that the really fundamental break in European intellectual history did not happen in the 15th, but rather in the 12th century. Many changes in the 12th century were 'external,' such as the mediaeval warm-period and the resulting economic improvements, but what also happened was a better acquaintance of more remote places and cultures, especially the Arabic world (the *reconquista* of Toledo in 1085; the first crusade in 1095).[11] In particular, the Latins could profit from the Arabic scientific bloom in the *ṭāifa* principalities in Spain (1031 – 1086).[12] But there were also 'internal' changes within Latin society pre-dating the translations: a renewed interest in arts and sciences and new forms of schools and of teaching emerging towards the end of the 11th century. For instance, the medical school in Salerno became innovative already during the generation before the early translator of medical Arabic works Constantinus Africanus († 1087), while in the monasteries of Ripoll (in contact with Arabic learning) and Montecassino historiography, hagiography, and medicine were avidly studied already in the 11th century.[13] Therefore, some hints of what would become the 12th century blossoming in philosophy and science can clearly be made out all throughout the 11th century in the Latin world. It would seem that new ways of thinking and acting were developed that were experimented with in the 12th century and that were finally consolidated into what is known as the late Middle Ages, with its scholasticism, university structure, central papal power, and so forth. The above mentioned first wave of translations[14] in the 12th century is currently studied at large, and many important texts are being published for the first time. The importance of this wave of translations, firstly from the Arabic and only slightly later directly from the Greek, is obvious as far as Latin culture is concerned. The strongest impact came from Aristotelian works that had been unknown in the Latin West since antiquity, especially on physics, metaphysics, and ethics. On the one hand, the trans-

9 For the first two waves, see Brungs, Mudroch, and Schulthess (eds. 2017, 93 – 148: chapter 3, written by a number of experts).

10 Cf. Haskins 1933.

11 Cf. Boshof 2007, on the historical background, and Swanson 1999 (esp. chapter 5), on the changes in science and education.

12 Dates from Samsó 1992, 125, who speaks of the "siglo de oro," though acknowledging that it was a somewhat short "century." The greater part of Samsó's book covers this key period (ch. 3 and 4).

13 Details in Riché 1979, here 157.

14 A first overview was provided by D'Alverny 1982; more recently, see Burnett 2009. Schmitt 1983, 65 counted the "waves" differently: in his opinion, the first was Boethius, while the 12th and 13th century coincided.

lations were made where Latin-Arabic contact had been possible: Spain, Southern Italy, the Levant (now a contact zone through the Crusader states).[15] On the other hand, works were directly translated from Greek, mostly in Constantinople, which had some exchange of bilingual diplomats with the Latins. How important the Arabic mediation for the Latin Aristotle really was is controversially debated at present.

In the 13th century, in a second wave, works that had been overlooked were translated, as well as some that were deemed insufficient were re-translated or reworked. The most important among these translators was certainly the Dominican friar William of Moerbeke (c. 1215 – 1286) who held a Latin bishopric on the Peloponnese and thus had access to many Greek manuscripts.[16] He translated or reworked most of Aristotle's extant works. Through these two waves of translations, the Latin West was finally acquainted with the works of Aristotle, Euclid, Ptolemy, the *corpus Hippocraticum* and many other medical texts, but also with a plethora of astrological, magical, and alchemical texts from late antiquity or by Arabic authors. This vast amount of newly acquired intellectual material would go on to be assimilated by Latin thought throughout the 12th and 13th centuries, giving rise to new approaches and new modes of studying and writing. This scholasticism brought changes to many facets of late mediaeval society.

The translators belonging to both these waves of translations followed Jerome's Bible translation method, *verbum de verbo* (not *sensu de senso*). Jerome followed this 'verbatim method' because of the holiness of the biblical text. The scientific translators seem to have had an equal degree of awe towards their sources. The overall idea seems to have been that the translator should not interfere with the original thought he may not fully comprehend. An interpretative way of translating would thus have seemed unscientific to the mediaeval scholar. Mercken studied this translation method for the second wave translator Robert Grosseteste. He states:[17]

> (1) Each Greek word is rendered by a Latin counterpart; (2) the order of words is rigorously preserved; and (3) the syntax is faithfully reproduced in Latin.

The resulting words might have thus been rather difficult to understand, certainly also for novices back then. Therefore, the downside of this procedure was that students had to learn Greek syntax and diction, basically learning to think 'the Greek way.' As a consequence, the newly accessible vast *corpus Aristotelicum* was soon accompanied by *compendia*, *florilegia*, *abbreviationes*, *summulae*, *commentaria* and similar study aids.[18] Indeed, the new translations ended up producing a flood of

15 Cf. Burnett 2009, part 4, about Antioch.

16 Cf. Brams and Vanhamel (eds. 1989).

17 Mercken 1981, 690.

18 A preliminary synthesis about these kinds of works was provided by Grabmann 1939. On the commentaries, see Valérie Cordonier, Pieter De Leemans and Carlos Steel in Brungs, Mudroch and Schulthess (eds. 2017, 149 – 161).

commentaries. Lohr's repertory (1988 – 2000) lists some 2,000 commentaries on Aristotle by some 500 authors between the early Latin translations and the year 1500.

Modern scholarly interest for Latin translations of Aristotle started rather late, when Latin was no longer the natural medium of scholarly communication but became worth studying in and of itself. In 1939, the *Aristoteles Latinus* editing project was initiated, run by the Union Académique Internationale.[19] By now, virtually all translations of the first or even first two waves have been critically edited, e. g. the *Metaphysica* or *Ethica Nicomachea*. A digital online collection is also available ("ALD" by Brepols Publishers). The project is still on-going. Spurious works of Aristotle are not included.

3 *Spuria*

Beginning in late antiquity, alongside genuine works, some spurious works circulated among the *corpus Aristotelicum*, for instance *De mundo*. Within the context of Aristotle's reception by the Arabic world, many other works were translated or produced, some texts clearly forged with the intent to "prove" Aristotle's compatibility with Islam, which (just like Christianity) believes in a personal God who created *ex nihilo* the world and individual, immortal human souls. In general, it seems safe to say that Aristotle did not agree with these points; in contrast, Plato's position (especially as voiced in the *Timaeus*) seems more compatible with them. Against this background, many later spurious Aristotelian works tried to remedy Aristotle's "mistakes" on these positions – that were of such great importance for Christian and Islamic theology. Usually, these spurious works had a Neoplatonist background, and thus continued the amalgamation of Aristotelianism and Platonism which had already begun in late antiquity. Many of these *spuria* were translated into Latin together with Aristotle's genuine works and helped perpetrate a somewhat skewed view of the philosopher's positions. For some of these works, Greek or Arabic sources are known; for others, only the Latin text is still extant, while some may even have been written in Latin in the first place. This large corpus of works is still rather neglected by academia. Some of the most important and influential among these spurious works are *Liber de causis*, *De pomo*, *Liber de bona fortuna*, *De secretis secretorum* and *Theologia Aristotelis*.[20] Suspicion about the authenticity of some of these works had already been voiced as early as the 13th century, and in many cases it slowly became common knowledge that they had not been written by Aristotle (often only after the time of Cusanus). In some cases, the question of their authenticity is still debated among philologists nowadays. These *spuria* were key in furthering the blend between Muslim, Christian, Platonist and Aristotelian thought, thus shaping a current that

19 Cf. Steel *et al.* 1939-. Homepage: https://hiw.kuleuven.be/dwmc/al.

20 Cf. Schmitt 1986.

was to become formative for Renaissance Neoplatonism. As an example, we provide details about three of the most widely-spread texts:[21]

- *Liber de causis* (Schmitt and Knox 1985, No. 13). This text is a decoction from the *Elementatio theologica* by late-antique Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus. It was translated from the Arabic in 12th century Spain (probably by Gerard of Cremona and possibly reworked by Dominicus Gundisalvi). The Arabic version may date back to al-Kindī (the "father of Arabic philosophy," 801–873). Thomas Aquinas had already understood its provenance.[22]
- *Secretum secretorum* (Schmitt and Knox 1985, No. 81). Translated from the Arabic (*Sirr al-asrār*), the text is conveniently edited by Robert Steele, together with Roger Bacon's commentary. This is the most widespread pseudo-Aristotelian text; according to Imbach,[23] there are 600 known manuscripts. The text presents itself as a *Fürstenspiegel* for Alexander the Great.[24]
- *De pomo* (Schmitt and Knox 1985, No. 75), also translated from the Arabic (*Risālat al-tuffāha*). It can easily be read in the *editio minor* by Acampora-Michel, which largely follows the rare *editio maior* by Plezia.[25] This text is often found in manuscripts together with the *Secretum*. It was translated from the Hebrew by Manfred king of Sicily. No precise Arabic source is known, but several similar texts are. The composition follows Plato's *Phaedo* and, thus, Aristotle's death is likened to Socrates'. The title refers to when Aristotle held an apple in his hand on his death-bed.

Various authors quoted these works as being by Aristotle throughout the 15th century. For example, in the 1490s, Thomist scholar Lambertus de Monte (in Köln) used some of them to "prove" Aristotle's Christianity *ante litteram*.[26] But, as already pointed out, the authenticity of some of these works had already been challenged well before that

21 A bibliography about them can be found in Schmitt and Knox 1985.

22 *Super de causis, prologus*, ed. Saffrey 2002, 3: "Et in Graeco quidem invenitur sic traditus liber Procli Platonici, continens CCXI propositiones, qui intitulatur elementatio theologica; in Arabico vero invenitur hic liber qui apud Latinos de causis dicitur, quem constat de Arabico esse translatum et in Graeco penitus non haberi: unde videtur ab aliquo philosophorum Arabum ex praedicto libro Procli excerptus, praesertim quia omnia quae in hoc libro continentur, multo plenius et diffusius continentur in illo" ("And in Greek it is found transmitted as a book of the Platonist Proclus, containing 211 propositions and entitled *Elementatio theologica*. But in Arabic the book called *De causis* among the Latins is found: it is clearly translated from the Arabic and does not exist in Greek. Thus, it becomes clear that it was excerpted by some Arabic philosopher from the mentioned book of Proclus, especially so, as everything contained in this book is contained more fully and in greater detail in that one").

23 Cf. Imbach 1994, 299.

24 The work is discussed in detail by Ruedi Imbach in Cesalli, Imbach, de Libera, and Ricklin (eds., forthcoming).

25 Cf. Acampora-Michel 2001; Plezia 1960.

26 Cf. von Moos 2014.

time. Besides Aquinas, the *Anonymus ordinis fratrum minorum* (likely to be identified with Hugo de Novocastro OFM) wrote in his *Quaestio Utrum Aristotiles sit salvatus:*[27]

> Libellus iste sicut et alius, qui dicitur de pomo Aristotelis, non sunt authentici.
>
> This little book [i.e. *Secretum secretorum*] as well as another one called "on Aristotle's apple" are not authentic.

4 Sources and translations available in Latin in the 15th century

The 15th and 16th centuries witnessed the third wave of Aristotle translations from the Greek. At that time, most of Plato's works also became available for the first time in Latin.[28] Commentaries prompted a new debate concerning Platonism versus Aristotelianism, especially among Italian humanists and the Greeks who had emigrated to Italy from the faltering Byzantine empire (cf. the *halôsis*, 1453). A renewed humanist interest stressing the rhetorical qualities of "good" Latin made the old *verbum de verbo* translation of Aristotle look "ugly" and a need was felt to make the texts available in "real" Latin. This is the background of the third and last translation wave of Aristotle's works (which, in principle, had already been available in Latin). During the Renaissance, the contents of Aristotle's works became hotly debated, and details in translations were often discussed; many translators now wrote prefaces stating why all older translations had not been acceptable. These translations have been rather neglected compared to the ones belonging to the first and second wave. Among the most important translators, one can mention:

- Leonardus Brunus Aretinus (c. 1370 – 1444), an early Italian humanist, who also wrote theoretical treatises on how to translate from the Greek (without the *verbum de verbo* technique).
- Georgios Trapezountios (1395 – 1472), a Greek *émigré* with a strong preference for Aristotle over Plato.
- Basilios Bessarion (1403 – 1472), another Greek *émigré* who become a Catholic cardinal and a friend of Cusanus, who read his brand new translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysica*.
- Joannes Argyropoulos (1415 – 1487), another Greek *émigré*, who reworked a large part of the *corpus Aristotelicum*.
- Augustinus Niphus (c. 1473 – c. 1540), an Italian philosopher.
- Joachim Perionius (1498/9 – 1559) and Adrianus Turnebus (1512 – 1565), two French humanists who used Bruni's method.

27 Imbach 1994, 309. On the authorship, see Duba 2014.

28 Cf. Hankins 2003 – 2007 and Schmitt 1983, 64 – 88.

Cusanus lived during the beginning of this third wave of translations, and he was acquainted with the brand-new works by Trapezountios and Bessarion. The list shows that the movement continued and indeed intensified after Cusanus' death (1464); especially, one must underline that the important translations by Argyropoulos were not yet available to Cusanus. The *indices fontium* in the critical edition of Cusanus show that, among Aristotle's works, Nicolaus often quoted the *Metaphysica*, followed by *Physica*, *De caelo*, *De anima*, the *Ethica Nicomachea* and the *Organon*. In many respects, these works may be said to be the most important Aristotelian works, as far as their late mediaeval and Renaissance reception is concerned. *Spuria* were hardly used by Cusanus: only *De mundo* (in *De beryllo*), *Problemata physica* and an unspecified *Theologia* (in *De ludo globi*) are mentioned. The first two works were only found to be spurious by recent scholarship. This scanty use of *spuria* is remarkable, and might be explained by Nicolaus' contact with Bessarion, an excellent connoisseur of classical Greek literature who would have certainly been able to identify those *spuria* that lacked a Greek *Vorlage*. Below, we will see that Cusanus was able to profit from such a deep insight into Greek sources that would have been unthinkable in the Latin world only a generation before him.

After these three waves of translations, by the 15th century a rich collection of Aristotle translations had become available. The following non-exhaustive list illustrates the Latin translations of the three most important works for Cusanus' thought. A number is included to denote the translation wave.[29]

Metaphysica

- (i) Edited in *Aristoteles Latinus* (AL): Jacobus Venetus, "*Vetustissima*" (abruptly stops in book 4); *Versio composita* (abruptly stops in book 4); *Versio media vel anonyma* (books 1–14, book 11 being missing; possibly by Stephen of Antioch [Burnett]). (all from the 12th century).
- (ii) Not yet edited: Guillelmus de Moerbeka (complete, 13th century, based on *Versio media*); Michael Scotus (?), from the Arabic ("*nova*," extant only in an early modern print together with Averroes' commentary).
- Thomas Aquinas, Aegidius Romanus, Albertus Magnus, Buridanus, Paulus Venetus, among others, commented on the work. 42 commentaries from the 15th century are known.[30]
- (iii) Basilius Bessarion (written in 1446–1453, used by Cusanus; it will become by far the most often printed translation).[31]

29 The printed translations are listed in Schmitt and Knox 1985. The most comprehensive list to date, including translations up to 1300 *AD*, can be found in Brungs, Mudroch, and Schulthess (eds. 2017, 95–109).

30 On this literature, see Amerini and Galluzzo (eds. 2014); on the translations, see Borgo 2014.

31 Cf. Monfasani 2011a, 15 and Cranz 1984, 180.

- Johannes Argyropoulos (1415 – 1487).
- Joachim Perionius (1498/9 – 1559).
- An unidentified translation.[32]

Ethica Nicomachea

- (i) Edited in AL: Burgundio of Pisa, "*Ethica vetus*" (books 2 – 3) and "*Ethica nova*" (book 1).
- (ii) Robert Grosseteste (all 10 books), revised by Guillelmus de Moerbeka (all 10 books).
- (iii) Leonardus Brunus Aretinus (c. 1370 – 1444).
- Johannes Argyropoulos (1415 – 1487, by far the most commonly printed).
- Johannes Bernardus Felicianus (c. 1490 – 1552; written in 1543, reprinted by Frommann-Holzboog in 2006).
- Joachim Perionius (1498/9 – 1559).
- Adrianus Turnebus (1512 – 1565).

Physica[33]

- (i) Edited in AL: Jacobus Venetus (written ca. 1128) "*Translatio vetus*," *Translatio Vaticana* (circle of Stephen of Antioch? This text is fragmentary).
- (ii) Guillelmus de Moerbeka (with two revisions: before 1269 "*Translatio nova*," and again before 1286; the only known complete manuscript is Madrid, Biblioteca nacional, 1067, ff. 1 – 72^{v}).
- (iii) Georgios Trapezountios (written around the mid-15th century).
- Johannes Argyropoulos (written around 1460; first printed in Venice, 1496; most commonly printed).
- Augustinus Niphus (first printed in Venice, 1508).
- Joachim Perionius (first printed in Paris, 1549).
- Franciscus Vicomercatus (first printed in Paris, 1550).
- Julius Pacius (first printed in Frankfurt a. M., 1596).

32 See Cranz 1984 for bibliographic details about early prints of these translations. For *Metaphysica* 180, *Ethica* 172, *Physica* 212.

33 An overview of the translations is provided by Roelli 2014, 943 – 947.

5 Different translation styles

As an example to illustrate the difference between the translations of the first two waves and those of the third, let us take a closer look at a passage from the *Metaphysica*; the main statement, the 'law of non-contradiction'; is underlined in all three versions.

Aristoteles, *Metaphysica* IV, 3, 1005b (Ed. Ross, Oxford 1924)	Iacobus Venetus, *Metaphysica* (Ed. G. Vuillemin-Diem, Brussels 1970, 68f.)	Bessarion, *Metaphysica* (Ingolstadt 1577[34], f. 44[r], = Firmin Didot 2, 503)
ὅτι μὲν οὖν βεβαιοτάτη ἡ τοιαύτη πασῶν ἀρχή, δῆλον· τίς δ' ἔστιν αὕτη, μετὰ ταῦτα λέγωμεν.	Quod quidem igitur huiusmodi omnium certissimum principium sit, manifestum est; quid autem sit hoc, post hec dicemus.	Quod igitur tale principium omnium certissimum est, patet. Quid autem illud sit, deinceps dicamus.
τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ ἅμα ὑπάρχειν τε καὶ μὴ ὑπάρχειν ἀδύνατον τῷ αὐτῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ αὐτό (καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα προσδιορισαίμεθ' ἄν, ἔστω προσδιωρισμένα πρὸς τὰς λογικὰς δυσχερείας)· αὕτη δὴ πασῶν ἐστὶ βεβαιοτάτη τῶν ἀρχῶν· ἔχει γὰρ τὸν εἰρημένον διορισμόν.	Idem enim simul esse et non esse inpossibile est eidem et secundum idem (et quecumque alia determinavimus, sint determinata [et] ad logicas gravitates); hoc autem omnium est certissimum principiorum; habet enim predictam diffinitionem.	§ 9 Idem enim simul inesse et non inesse eidem, et secundum idem impossibile est. Et quaecumque alia annotaremus, sint ad Logicas difficultates annotata. Hoc igitur omnium est principiorum certissimum: habet etenim dictam annotationem.
[...]	[...]	[...]
εἰ δὲ μὴ ἐνδέχεται ἅμα ὑπάρχειν τῷ αὐτῷ τἀναντία (προσδιωρίσθω δ' ἡμῖν καὶ ταύτῃ τῇ προτάσει τὰ εἰωθότα), ἐναντία δ' ἐστὶ δόξα δόξῃ ἡ τῆς ἀντιφάσεως, φανερὸν ὅτι ἀδύνατον ἅμα ὑπολαμβάνειν τὸν αὐτὸν εἶναι καὶ μὴ εἶναι τὸ αὐτό·	si vero non contingit simul esse eidem contraria (determinentur autem nobis et hac propositione consueta), contraria autem est opinio opinioni que est contradictionis, manifestum quoniam inpossibile est simul opinari eundem esse et non esse idem;	Quod si non contingit inesse eidem contraria: annotentur autem a nobis etiam huic propositioni consueta, contraria vero opinio opinionis est, quae contradictionis est. Et patet quod inpossibile est simul eundem idem arbitrari esse et non esse,
ἅμα γὰρ ἂν ἔχοι τὰς ἐναντίας δόξας ὁ διεψευσμένος περὶ τούτου.	simul enim haberet contrarias opiniones mentiens de hoc.	simul etenim haberet opiniones contrarias, qui de ea re haberetur mendax.
διὸ πάντες οἱ ἀποδεικνύντες εἰς ταύτην ἀνάγουσιν ἐσχάτην δόξαν· φύσει γὰρ ἀρχὴ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀξιωμάτων αὕτη πάντων.	Unde omnes demonstrantes in hanc reducunt ultimam opinionem; natura enim principium et aliarum dignitatum hoc omnium est.	Quare omnes demonstrationes ad hanc ultimam opinionem reducunt. natura etenim haec caeterum quoque dignitatum omnium principium est.

34 See Bessarion, *Aristotelis Stagiritae Metaphysicorum Libri XIIII.* Ingolstadt: David Sartorius, 1577 [VD16 A 3492] online at BSB München, http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0001/bsb00015921/images.

Tredennick translated the Greek text as follows:[35]

> Clearly, then, it is a principle of this kind that is the most certain of all principles. Let us next state what this principle is. "It is impossible for the same attribute at once to belong and not to belong to the same thing and in the same relation"; and we must add any further qualifications that may be necessary to meet logical objections. [...]
>
> And if it is impossible for contrary attributes to belong at the same time to the same subject (the usual qualifications must be added to this premiss also), and an opinion which contradicts another is contrary to it, then clearly it is impossible for the same man to suppose at the same time that the same thing is and is not; for the man who made this error would entertain two contrary opinions at the same time.
>
> Hence all men who are demonstrating anything refer back to this as an ultimate belief; for it is by nature the starting-point of all the other axioms as well.

Both Latin translations are close to the original Greek text, but only Iacobus uses the *verbum de verbo* method which can be illustrated by the last sentence:

διὸ	πάντες οἱ ἀποδεικνύντες	εἰς ταύτην	ἀνάγουσιν	ἐσχάτην	δόξαν	φύσει
Unde	omnes demonstrantes	in hanc	reducunt	ultimam	opinionem;	natura

γὰρ	ἀρχὴ	καὶ	τῶν ἄλλων	ἀξιωμάτων	αὕτη	πάντων.
enim	principium	et	aliarum	dignitatum	hoc	omnium est.

The only differences are the article (lacking in Latin) and the word *est* at the very end. Bessarion made the same text sound 'more Latin' by replacing the awkward Latin participle *demonstrantes* with the noun *demonstrationes* and moved the verb to the end of the phrase – a more usual place in Latin (also above, for *contradictionis est* and *reducunt*). Since it was not so clear that *natura* was to be understood as an ablative and not a nominative, Bessarion apparently tried to make things clearer by adding *haec* (*opinio*). In the remainder of the quoted text, Bessarion also used *deinceps* instead of *post haec*, *mendax* instead of *mentiens*, or the better fitting *difficultas* instead of *gravitas* for δυσχερεία. Compared with Tredennick's English translation, which is still a reasonably 'close' translation for modern standards, Bessarion's is still much more faithful to the original Greek. In terms of Latin readability, Bessarion's new translation is certainly an improvement over Iacobus'. In general, early-modern authors preferred these 'improved' translations from the third wave; this was especially true for the Neoplatonist Renaissance circles which Cusanus belonged to. The new translations of Plato and the improved ones for Aristotle set the stage for a controversy that had already been widespread in Byzantium for centuries: which philosopher was to be preferred?

35 Cf. Tredennick, tr. 1961, 161–162.

6 The Plato-Aristotle controversy and their Christianisation

With the emigration of Greek scholars in the 15th century, both Platonists and Aristotelians came to Italy and continued their often rather hostile debates about which philosophy was to be preferred. Until Marsilio Ficino (1433 – 1499) translated all of Plato's dialogues into Latin, Plato was still only partially known in the Latin West. The translations were completed a few years after Cusanus' death.[36] The Middle Ages knew the *Timaeus* and, from the 12th century onwards, the *Meno* and the *Cratylus*. The universities had largely been inspired by the newly accessible Aristotle texts in the 12th century; in contrast to them, many humanists (two hundred years later) worked outside these universities, especially in the Italian city-states, and saw themselves rather as Platonists and the newly available Latin Plato was much studied and revered. Among the Greek *émigrés*, the two most extreme positions may have been held by scholars Georgios Plethon (1355 – 1452/4) and Georgios Trapezountios (1395 – 1472/3), who favoured Plato and Aristotle respectively. At the same time, the debate became equally heated in Byzantium, when the strongly pro-Aristotle patriarch Gennadios Scholarios had Plethon's books burned.[37] Admittedly, there were more conciliatory voices, like that of Platonist cardinal Bessarion (a pupil of Plethon and a friend of Cusanus), Ficino, or Pico della Mirandola. On the whole, the Catholic church remained more Aristotelian, whereas the Greek Orthodox favoured Plato. However, a current of Latin anti-Aristotelianism occurred right from the beginning. During the 13th century (between 1210 and 1277), several bans were issued on the reading of Aristotle at the University of Paris or on the teaching of some of his views. Later, resistance towards Aristotle can be found especially among Franciscan friars such as the *Anonymus* quoted above and Petrus Johannis Olivi (1248 – 1298) who was against philosophy in general, a view he expressed in his *De perlegendis philosophorum libris*;[38] in contrast, Dominicans tended to be Thomists and thus Aristotelians.

To provide some direct and less abstract insight, this section ends with a few passages that illustrate the more extreme views, before focusing mainly on Cusanus in the following section. The debate had become so heated that some philosophers tried to prove that Aristotle had been a Christian *ante litteram* and was therefore likely to be residing in Heaven. Both Lambertus de Monte († 1499), in his *Quaestio de salvatione Aristotelis* (III, 1, 1), and the *Epilogus* written by his pupils state:[39]

36 In 1468/9, but printed only in 1484; the first nine dialogues seem to have been finished in 1464, Cusanus' death year (cf. Hankins 1990, 301).

37 See Monfasani 2011 on him and other pro-Western Greeks.

38 Edited in König-Pralong, Ribordy, and Suarez-Nani 2010, 409 – 450.

39 Edited by Roelli in von Moos 2014, 187 and 237.

> [...] si commune dictum omnino non deperditur, credibile est Aristotelem circa finem vite illa verba dixisse, que communiter de eo dicta famantur: O ens entium[40] miserere mei; in quo patet Aristotelem suam imperfectionem deo per modum confessionis recognovisse. [...]
>
> Idcirco venerandus et eximius magister noster Lambertus de Monte, sacrarum litterarum interpres et scrutator profundissmus, in prehabita questione ostendit et concludit probabiliter per autoritates scripture divine et iuxta saniorem doctorum sententiam Aristotelem summum et philosophorum principem esse de numero salvandorum.

> [...] indeed, if the common saying is not completely corrupt, it is believable that Aristotle uttered these words, that are usually attributed to him, at the end of his life: "O entity of entities have mercy upon me." In these words it is plain that Aristotle admitted his imperfection towards God by the means of confession. [...]
>
> Therefore our venerable and excellent master Lambertus de Monte, most profound interpreter and investigator of holy scriptures, shows and concludes by probability in the foregoing *quaestio* by the authorities of divine scripture and according to the more sound opinion of the church doctors, that the most distinguished Aristotle, the prince of philosophers, is among the number of those that will be saved.

Other authors strongly disagreed, like the above mentioned Franciscan *Anonymus* in his *Quaestio Utrum Aristotiles sit salvatus:*[41]

> Quantum ad tertium est videndum, an Aristotlilis sit salvatus, quod est principale quaesitum. Et est dicendum, quod non.
>
> Et hoc patet ex iam dictis. Nam ex primo articulo habetur, quod ex puris naturalibus inpossibile est sciri hanc beatitudinem, quam speramus, et quod impossibile est nobis eam naturaliter scire. Nunc autem Aristotiles fuit constitutus in puris naturalibus. Ideo talis beatitudo fuit sibi simpliciter incognita. Sed inpossibile est hanc felicitatem seu beatitudinem attingere, quam non contingit nec scire nec appetere. Ergo etc.

> As far as the third point is to be considered, whether Aristotle is saved, which is the principal question: it is to be said that he is not.
>
> And this becomes clear from what has already been said. For from the first article follows that it is impossible to know that beatitude for which we hope only through natural things (i. e. without revelation), and that it is impossible for us to know it in a natural way. Now Aristotle was working exclusively with natural things. Therefore such beatitude was simply unknowable to him. But it is impossible to attain felicity or beatitude that one cannot either know or strive for. Thus etc.

The more general discussion "Aristotle vs. Plato" can be exemplified by examining some points raised by Plethon and Trapezountios respectively. Plethon, in his *De differentiis*,[42] wrote in very classicist and rhetorical – one might say anti-Aristotelian – Greek in 1439:

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40 Quoted from a pseudo-Aristotelian text *De vita et morte* (Heumann 1723, 369; also mentioned in Acampora-Michel 2001, 186). The expression *ens entium* is known for the first time from Cusanus (so Acampora-Michel 2001, 66) in *De docta ignorantia* II, c. 7. This pseudo-Aristotelian text may thus be a very young forgery.

41 Edited by Imbach 1984, 308.

42 Cf. Lagarde 1973, 321.

Οἱ μὲν ἡμῶν παλαιότεροι καὶ Ἑλλήνων καὶ Ῥωμαίων Πλάτωνα Ἀριστοτέλους πολλῷ τῷ μέσῳ προετίμων· τῶν δὲ νῦν καὶ μάλιστα τῶν πρὸς ἑσπέραν οἱ πολλοί, ἅτε ἐκείνων σοφώτεροι οἰόμενοι γεγονέναι, Ἀριστοτέλη πρὸ Πλάτωνος θαυμάζουσιν, Ἀβερόῃ τινὶ Ἄραβι πειθόμενοι μόνον Ἀριστοτέλη φάσκοντι τέλεόν τι τῆς φύσεως ἐς σοφίαν ἔργον ἀποτελέσθαι. Ἀνδρὶ εἰ μὲν τἆλλα σπουδαίῳ, οὐκ ἄν οὕτω ῥᾳδίως εἰπεῖν ἔχοιμι τὸν μέντοι περὶ ψυχῆς λόγον οὕτω φαύλῳ ὥστε καὶ θνητὴν αὐτὴν τίθεσθαι, καίτοι ὅς γ' ἄν ταύτην τὴν ἀμαθίαν τυγχάνῃ ἀμαθαίνων, τίνός ποτ' ἄν σπουδαίου πράγματος κριτὴς γένοιτο ἄξιος; καὶ ταῦτα οὐδ' Ἀριστοτέλους ταύτην δοκοῦντος τὴν ἀμαθίαν ἀμαθαίνειν. Χρὴ γὰρ τἄληθῆ λέγειν καὶ μὴ συκοφαντεῖν τὸν ἄνδρα, καίτοι πλείστους γε τῶν πρὸ αὐτοῦ σεσυκοφαντηκότα· ἀλλ' ἐμοὶ οὐδὲ τὸ συκοφάντην ἀντισυκοφαντεῖν εὐαγὲς εἶναι δοκεῖ. Ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ νῦν εἰσιν οἱ Πλάτωνι μᾶλλον τὴν ψῆφον τίθενται, ἡμεῖς τούτοις τε χαριζόμενοι, κἀκείνους εἰ μὴ σφόδρα φιλονείκως ἔχουσιν ἐπανορθοῦντες, βραχέα περὶ ὧν διαφέρονται τὼ ἄνδρε ἐροῦμεν καὶ δείξομεν τὸν ἄνδρα τἀνδρὸς οὐ μικρὸν λειπόμενον, οὐ μακρὰς οὐδ' ἐριστικὰς ἀλλ' ὡς οἷόν τε διὰ βραχυτάτων ποιούμενοι τὰς ἀποδείξεις.

Our ancient men, both the Hellenes and the Romans, preferred Plato in esteem to Aristotle by far. But our contemporaries, especially most men in the West, having started to feel wiser than those, admire Aristotle more than Plato. They were persuaded by the Arab Averroes who held that only Aristotle accomplished something final about nature in his philosophical work. I should not so lightly speak about that otherwise serious man (Averroes); but he spoke so vilely about the soul that he posited it to be mortal. Someone who happens to suffer from such ignorance, of what serious matter could he possibly become a worthy judge? Aristotle is not held to have suffered from this ignorance. For it is necessary to say the truth and not to calumniate the man, although he himself calumniated most of his predecessors. But to me it does not even then seem lawful to calumniate when calumniating in return. As there are still today some who would rather give their vote to Plato, we wish to congratulate them and to amend those others, at least if they are not too fond of quarrelling. We will briefly treat of the things about which the two men disagreed and we will show that the one (Aristotle) lags much behind the other (Plato). We shall not make the proofs long or quarrelsome but as much as possible in shortness.

In contrast, some of the headings of Georgios Trapezountios' lengthy *Comparationes phylosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis*[43] from 1458 read as follows:

Quod Plato Platonicique omnes, uerbis laenocinio compositionis solum ualuerunt, rebus penitus nudi sunt, Aristoteles in utriusque magnus. (pdf, p. 9)

INCIPIT LIBER SECUNDUS capitulum primum, et quod in hoc libro demonstratur, conuenire Aristotelem ueritati catholicae, Platonem minime. (pdf, p. 54)

Quod Aristoteles subintellexit deum unum et trinum esse et quod in creaturis impressa sunt uestigia dei, ex quibus subintelliguntur quae credimus. (pdf, p. 95)

Quod uerisimile est Aristotelem, aeternam esse salutem consequutum. (pdf, p. 192)

LIBER TERTIUS DE VITA PHYLOsophorum Platonis et Aristotelis, quod de laude unius, et turpitudine alterius in hoc tertio agitur libro, et quod à scriptis eorum uita sua est examinanda. (pdf, p. 200)

De Gemisto et quod nisi obstes iniciis paruis, magnae plerumque calamitates insequuntur, quae res unius Machometi patet exemplo. (pdf, p. 322)

43 Venice: Per Iacobum Pentium de Leuco 1523. Online scan: https://books.google.ch/books?id=w7zul_2Z4mYC, all abbreviations expanded, punctuation and capitalisation as in print. The print has no pagination, so pdf page numbers from the Google scan are provided to identify the passages.

> That Plato and all Platonists were only capable in the enticement of the composition in words, regarding facts they are completely naked; Aristotle is great in both.
>
> Beginning of the second book, chapter one. And that it is proved in this book that Aristotle is in agreement with the Catholic truth, Plato not at all.
>
> That Aristotle intuitively understood that God is one and three and that traces of God are impressed in creatures whence that which we believe can be intuitively grasped.
>
> That it is probable that Aristotle achieved eternal salvation.
>
> Book three about the lives of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle: this third book treats of the praise of the one and the foulness of the other, and that their lives must be examined from their writings.
>
> On Plethon and that if you do not oppose small beginnings, often great mischief follows; something that is obvious in the case of Mohammed's example.

Trapezountios subsequently tries to prove that the Prophet Mohammed was a Platonist. Of course, most authors did not take sides in such an extreme way: Renaissance Platonists – automatically and unconsciously – did indeed take a lot of inspiration from their Aristotelian background (as stressed above). The next paragraph will show how Cusanus typically took ideas from both philosophers, although with a clear hierarchy among them. Despite a general tendency in favour of Plato, which was common during the Renaissance, the importance of Aristotle, especially in the universities, did not diminish in the Early-Modern era.[44] It seem that university science would have hardly been possible without a strong dose of Aristotelian vocabulary and methodology. Between 1500 and 1700, the number of known Aristotle commentaries rose again.[45] It was only from the 18th century onwards that science apparently superseded Aristotle and developed his approaches so much that the philosopher became more and more obsolete and a matter of mere historical interest.

7 Cusanus' use of Aristotelian texts

After this overview of the main Aristotelian resources available by the 15th century, a few statements by Cusanus about Aristotle shall be quoted from Nicolaus' own works. Cusanus belonged to a Neoplatonist line that owed a great deal to Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita (not least through Albertus' commentary to *De mystica theologia*), Thierry of Chartres, Raimundus Lullus, Meister Eckhart, and the aforementioned pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de causis*. But Cusanus was not an anti-Aristotelian;[46] he studied Aristotle's works all through his life, and even intensified his interest in the Greek philosopher in later years.[47] These works and Aristotle himself are often mentioned. Cusanus' approach seems to be very similar to that of the Neoplatonists

44 Cf. Kuhn (online, 2018, chapter 1) discusses possible reasons for this.
45 Cf. Blum (1988, 141–148) counts 6,653 commentaries in Lohr's repertory.
46 Despite the opposite claim, e. g. by Monfasani 2012, 480.
47 Fundamental on Cusanus' use of Aristotle: Ziebart 2008.

in late antiquity: in order to understand the world and the human being, Aristotle is of great use; but for the higher mystic realms of philosophy and theology, Plato is to be preferred. Two key passages from different phases in Cusanus' body of texts might illustrate this. In his first major work, *De docta ignorantia* (1440 *AD*), Nicolaus developed his famous idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, which contradicted Aristotelian logic – at least at face value. He met strong criticism from traditionalist scholastic Johannes Wenck, who saw the work as heretical, pantheist, and Eckhartian. Nine years after the initial publication, Cusanus wrote an *Apologia* (1449) to the work answering criticism by Wenck and others. He claimed (in *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, n. 22)[48] contradictions to only be allowed in *alta regione intellectus*. He also stated that negative and positive theology were united in his approach (n. 17):

> Ignorantia enim abicit, intelligentia colligit; docta vero ignorantia omnes modos, quibus accedi ad veritatem potest, unit.
>
> Ignorance casts aside, understanding gathers; but learned ignorance unites all modes by which truth can be approached.

Before this, he identified the lack of *coincidentia oppositorum* with the *Aristotelica secta* (n. 7):

> Unde, cum nunc Aristotelica secta praevaleat, quae haeresim putat esse oppositorum coincidentiam, in cuius admissione est initium ascensus in mysticam theologiam, in ea secta nutritis haec via penitus insipida quasi propositi contraria ab eis procul pellitur, ut sit miraculo simile – sicuti sectae mutatio – reiecto Aristotele eos altius transilire.
>
> Therefore, as now the Aristotelian way of thinking prevails which holds the coincidence of opposites to be heretical, whose admittance is the beginning of the ascent to mystical theology, this path seems totally ignorant and tasteless to those who were bred in this school and is strongly rejected by them as contrary to their goal. Thus it would be a miracle – or a change of school – if they could rise higher having left Aristotle behind.

This is certainly Cusanus' most famous controversial statement involving Aristotle's teachings. The passage might be quoted to demonstrate Nicolaus' opposition to Aristotle;[49] but, as a matter of fact, he is criticising Aristotelianism as taught in universities only if it is used in mystical theology. Nicolaus was condemning people like Wenck and not Aristotle in general, as demonstrated by Cusanus' plentiful use of Aristotle. In 1453, Cusanus received the new translations of *Metaphysica* and *Ethica Nichomachea* by Bessarion, both of which would become crucial for his further thought. For his late work *De venatione sapientiae* (1463) he had additionally read Diogenes Laertius (translated by Ambrogio Traversari, before 1432) as well as Euse-

48 Quotations from the critical edition by Klibansky *et al.* 1932–.

49 On this problem see Luca Gili's and Alexander Spieth's contributions to the present volume.

bius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* (recently translated by Trapezountios)[50] and had thus considerably broadened his view of the history of philosophy in antiquity. In this work, he compared Plato and Aristotle *in extenso* in the chapter *"Quomodo Plato et Aristoteles venationem fecerunt"* (c. 8, n. 20 – 22):

> Plato autem universalem omnium causam per ascensum de bono participato ad per se bonum venatus est hoc modo: Considerabat enim omnia entia, atque etiam nondum actu entia sed tantum potentia, participatione unius boni bona dici. [...] Affirmabat igitur principium primum deum per se unum et bonum. Et principia aliorum, scilicet entis, vitae et intellectus et talium, nominabat 'per se exsistens,' 'per se vita,' 'per se intellectus' et principia causasque esse ipsius esse, vivere et intelligere. [...]
>
> Sed cum ipso in hoc non consentiunt Peripatetici, qui ens rationis viderunt a nostro intellectu constitui, reale ens non attingere. [p. 23] [...] Tamen Aristoteles, qui ut Anaxagoras primam causam intellectum, qui est principium motus, asserit, non sibi attribuit totius universi administrationem, sed caelestium tantum; caelestia vero haec terrena dicit gubernare. Epicurus vero totam deo soli sine cuiuscumque adminiculo universi tribuit administrationem. Sed divini nostri theologi revelatione superna didicerunt primam causam, cum omnium assertione sit tricausalis, scilicet efficiens, formalis et finalis, quae per Platonem unum et bonum, per Aristotelem intellectus et ens entium nominatur, esse sic unam quod trina et ita trinam quod una. Quae cum sit causa efficiens, vocatur [p. 24] iuxta Platonem unitas, et sit causa formalis, iuxta Aristotelem entitas, et sit causa finalis, iuxta utrosque bonitas.
>
> Plato hunted the universal cause of everything by ascending from the participated good to the Good that is good *per se* in this way: he considered that all beings – including those that are not yet actually in existence but only potentially – are called good by means of their participating in the one Good. [...] He claimed thus that the first principle, God, was one and good *per se*. And the principles of other things, like being, life, intellect, and the like, he called existence *per se*, life *per se*, understanding *per se* and he claimed that they were the causes of being, living, understanding.
>
> But in this the Peripatetics did not agree: it seemed to them that rational being is brought about by our intellect and cannot reach real being. [...] Aristotle, however, who held like Anaxagoras that the intellect (νοῦς) was the first cause – the principle of movement – did not assign it (νοῦς) the superintendence of the entire universe but only of heavenly beings. The heavenly beings he said governed the earthly ones. Epicurus, however, assigned the entire administration of the whole universe without auxiliaries to God alone. But our (Christian) divine theologians learned through heavenly revelation and with the consent of all that the first cause is tricausal, i.e. efficient, formal, and final. It is called by Plato the One and the Good, by Aristotle intellect and being of all beings; thus it is one in three and three in one: as the efficient cause it is called 'unity' by Plato, as the formal cause 'entity' by Aristotle, and as final cause by both 'goodness.'

This important passage shows that in the meantime, Cusanus had studied the history of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy in depth, in such a way that had been unattainable for Latin writers before his time – the lack of Greek sources in Latin translation being the main cause thereof. In the preceding paragraph, Cusanus praised the Philosopher as *acutissimus Aristoteles*. Nicolaus highlighted the fact that both Plato and Aristotle "tracked down" truth and glimpsed important parts of it, as far

50 Cf. Monfasani 2012, 477.

as was possible without the aid of divine Christian revelation. It is interesting to note how Cusanus uses Aristotelian terminology (like *potentia*, *actus*, the Aristotelian *causae* etc.) throughout to describe the approach both philosophers had when "tracking down" wisdom. Aristotelian scientific vocabulary had clearly become indispensable. As a preliminary conclusion to Cusanus' approach to Aristotle one can quote and confirm Ziebart:[51]

> Unlike the scholastics, therefore, Cusanus does not use Aristotle as a model. We might say that while Thomas Aristotelianizes his theology, Cusanus molds certain of the philosopher's key notions to conform to his own kind of theology, and in so doing, neo-Platonizes Aristotle.

8 Summary and conclusions

This contribution has outlined the Latin transmission of Aristotle's works. During antiquity, practically all reception of Aristotle's works had happened in Greek; only as late as towards its end, Boethius first made at least most of his logical writings (*Organon*) accessible to Latin readers. Other important works, especially those on physics, metaphysics, and ethics remained unknown before the great waves of translations from the Greek sources.

These translations may conveniently be divided into three 'waves'; the first two in the 12th and 13th centuries translated all of the extant Aristotelian works and were all instrumental in creating scholastic university philosophy. Mediaeval Latin Christianity had followed what might be termed an 'eclectic Platonism' largely based on Augustine. The newly accessible works by Aristotle immediately sparked controversy regarding their compatibility with Christianity. The two new Mendicant Orders played a key role in this controversy in the 13th century: the Dominicans embraced much of the new Aristotle, while the Franciscans remained sceptical. Some of the former even tried to 'Christianise' the Philosopher and claimed that it was likely he had reached Christian salvation. The third "humanist" wave of translations began during Cusanus' lifetime and was to last another century after his death. It did not provide access to previously unknown Aristotelian texts: rather, it made them more understandable in Latin and in some cases the texts were translated by Greek scholars with a deeper understanding of their contents. Translators of the first two waves used the *verbum de verbo* method (which renders one Greek word with a Latin one in the same order and produces hard to understand, often barely grammatical Latin). This translation work was aided by a plethora of auxiliary study aids. An example of the different translation styles has been analysed in the present contribution. Alongside the genuine works by Aristotle, many *spuria* were also translated. Some of them had clearly been forged with the intent to make the Philosopher more compatible with monotheist religion. It took time to separate them from the genuine works.

51 Ziebart 2008, 164.

The third translation 'wave' was largely aided by the inflow of Greek *émigrés* in the decades around the Fall of Constantinople. Among them were fanatic supporters of Aristotle as well as of Plato, rekindling the controversy between followers of the two philosophers. In such context, the more balanced Bessarion, an acquaintance of Cusanus, was especially important. Cusanus read his brand-new translation of *Metaphysica* (penned in 1446–1453). In subsequent works, the influence of this text on Cusanus is palpable. Cusanus' position on the controversy between the two philosophers was equally balanced; strikingly, Nicolaus hardly quoted Aristotelian *spuria*. Other texts were translated for the first time into Latin during this third wave of translations. Especially important for Cusanus was Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and opinions of eminent philosophers:* it provided him with a much deeper understanding of the history of philosophy in antiquity than would have previously been possible for Latin writers. A key passage from *De venatione sapientiae* (1463) has illustrated this aspect.

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